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ABSTRACT

Scholars and instructors of college writing may find that an examination of the literate sources behind Hugh Blair's bias for oral over written expression during the late 18th century gives perspective to their own teaching endeavors. The fact that there were many sources for Blair's own bias suggests that instead of the oral steadily giving way to the literate in 18th-century European culture, the oral seems to experience a general resurgence in the latter half of the century. Blair's most direct statement of his oral bias can be found in his direct comparison of the print and spoken media: "we must not forget to observe that spoken Language has a great superiority over written Language, in point of energy and force." An immediate source for Blair's inspired rhetorical power is the work of the Scottish classics scholar Thomas Blackwell, who, in the 1737 "Enquiry into the Life and Times of Homer," attributed Homer's poetic power partly to the fact that "Letters then were little known." Other influences on Blackwell include John Lawson, Thomas Sheridan, and George Campbell. The resurgence of interest in rhetorical power of the spoken word inevitably conflicts with the other abiding concern of the 18th century: correctness and perspicuity. When Campbell states that "it does not belong to critics to give laws to the prophets," the stirrings of Romanticism are evident. (Contains eight references.) (TB)

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Sources of Orality in Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*

This paper is to a large extent a continuation or extension of a paper delivered at the 1995 Penn State Conference in Rhetoric and Composition. In that paper I attempted to account for Hugh Blair's oral bias by arguing that his cultural position on the margins of British culture made him especially sensitive to various media of communication--in particular the oral forms still very much alive in Scotland, and the new print media which, while having an impact on those forms, helped to make Scotland one of the primary centers of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In this paper, I would like to explore the literate sources of Blair's oral bias, in particular the literary and rhetorical theory on which Blair draws in own writings. The fact that there are many such sources demonstrates that, instead of the oral steadily giving way to the literate in eighteenth-century European culture, the oral seems to experience a general resurgence in the latter half of the century. The reasons for this oral rhetorical cross-current are many, but toward the century's end, all seem to fuse into a general concern that the Age of Reason needed to be complemented by an age of eloquence, an aim for which the power of the spoken work would reassert itself as the ultimate rhetorical ideal and paradigm.

Blair's most direct statement of his oral bias can be found in his direct comparison of the print and spoken media: "although [there] be so great advantages of written Language, that Speech, without Writing, would have been very inadequate for the instruction of mankind; yet we must not forget to observe, that spoken Language has a great superiority over written Language, in point of energy and force. The voice of the living Speaker, makes an impression on the mind, much

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stronger than can be made by the perusal of any Writing. The tones of voice, the looks and gestures, which accompany discourse, and which no Writing can convey, render discourse, when it is well managed, infinitely more clear, and more expressive, than the most accurate Writing. For tones, looks, and gestures, are natural interpreters of the sentiments of the mind. They remove ambiguities; they enforce impressions; they operate on us by means of sympathy, which is one of the most powerful instruments of persuasion. Our sympathy is always awakened more, by hearing the Speaker, than by reading his work in our closet. Hence, though Writing may answer the purposes of mere instruction, yet all the great and high efforts of eloquence must be made, by means of spoken, not of written, Language" (136).

Blair's oral bias is not confined to the particular rhetorical qualities of the oral situation. It also colors his chapters on the "Rise and Progress of Language," and the "Rise and Progress of Language and of Writing." Language at its beginnings is given a special oral emphasis in Blair's account, in which the representational aspect of words grow out of imitations of natural sounds. Moreover, because the number of words thus invented were necessarily limited, "rude, uncultivated men. . . would naturally labour to make themselves understood, by varying their tones of voice, and accompanying their tones with the most significant gesticulations they could make" (107). Indeed, the impact of writing should appear in the Lectures as something of a fall: "The Philosopher addressed himself chiefly to the understanding. The Orator studied to persuade by reasoning, and retained more or less of the ancient passionate, and glowing Style, according as it was conducive to his purpose. Poetry became now a separate art, calculated chiefly to please, and confined generally to such subjects as related to the imagination and passions. Even its earliest companion, Music, was in a great measure divided from it" (322). Blair compares the early Bard, who, inspired "by events which interested his country or his friends, "arose and sung," to the modern authors, who "studied for reputation and gain," and "Composed cooly in their closets" (322-23).

An immediate source of such bardic inspired rhetorical power is the work of the Scottish

classical scholar Thomas Blackwell, who, in the 1737 "Enquiry into the Life and Times of Homer," attributed Homer's poetic power partly to the fact that "Letter's then were little known." Responding to a new historicism, several eighteenth-century critics, while not abandoning the search for timeless literary values, began to favor an approach which emphasized the importance of the minute particulars of history, culture, and biography to the creation of the work of art. In this regard, Blackwell made an explicit connection between the particular nature of Homer's poetry and the non- or semi-literate conditions in which it was produced. The importance of the rhetorical and historical context to Blackwell's interpretation of poetry is evident in his advice on how to experience Homer's verse: "his Poems were made to be recited, or sung to a Company; and not read in private, or perused in a Book, which few ere then were capable of doing: and I will venture to affirm, that whoever reads not Homer in this View loses a great Part of the Delight he might receive from the Poet" (122). Blackwell would have the modern reader attempt to experience the poetry as a listening, rather than a reading, audience, thereby recovering some of the aural power implicit in the original.

Although Blair mentions Blackwell in the lectures only to criticize his style, it is clear that his influence in Blair's writing is deep and pervasive. Like Blair, Blackwell finds the origin of poetry in speech and song:

> Hence AYDAEIN, signified at first simply to speak or utter the voice which now, with a small abbreviation (ADEIN) signifies to sing. And hence came the ancient Opinion, which appears so strange to us, "That Poetry was before Prose." (38)

Citing Strabo and Longinus, Blackwell makes the case that language and song have a common origin, thereby implying that the essence of linguistic communication does not reside in the "sign," but in those elements of the rhetorical situation which cannot be completely abstracted from their context. In basing his theory of communication on imitation rather than the coding-decoding model of language derived from phonetic script, Blackwell argues for the essentially oral nature of both language and poetry. Like eighteenth-century rhetoricians to come, Blackwell uses such oral

eloquence to criticize the artificiality of bookish rhetoric: Just as Ulysses "grew up a sagacious, subtle, bold, persuasive Man, without the aid of Masters of Rhetorick or Lectures of Politicks" (129), so "the Talent of their Poets was truly natural, and had a much better title to inspiration than their learned Successors; I mean learned by Books; tho' I do not say that Homer or Hesiod had no Learning of this sort: But perhaps (*utvineta egomet caedam mea*) the less of it the better. Certainly, My Lord, the Scholastick Turn, Technical Terms, imaginary Relations, and wire-drawn Sciences, spoil the natural Faculties, and marr Expression" (130).

Blackwell's most direct influence can be seen in Blair's interpretation of Ossian, the apocryphal Scottish bard whom Uwe Boker regards as the product of a general European search for the modern equivalent of Blackwell's Homer. "Before writing was invented," writes Blair in his treatise on Ossian, "no other compositions could take such hold of the imagination and memory, as to be preserved by oral tradition, and handed down from one race to another" (5). We shouldn't be surprised, writes Blair, "that an extensive search would discover a certain degree of resemblance among all the most ancient poetical productions, from whatever country they have proceeded" (5). Referring to Ossian's life and times, Blair remarks that, "in a country where poetry had been so long cultivated, and so highly honoured, is it any wonder that among the race and succession of bard, one Homer should arise" (29).

Another theorist of ancient poetry much influenced by Blackwell's work is Robert Lowth, the writer to whom Blair points as his chief source in his discussion of Hebrew verse. Like Blackwell, Robert Lowth uses a fledgling oral/literate approach to develop an oral poetic appropriate to his object of inquiry, Old Testament poetry. In his lectures, delivered between 1741 and 1750, published in Latin 1753, Lowth interprets the Old Testament poetry in a way which made available to the eighteenth century the work's essentially oral poetic. For Lowth, the overriding purpose of Hebrew poetry is to shape and reshape within the minds of the community the values, customs, and events which constitute the culture. Citing this as "the principal end and aim of poetry," Lowth gives as "illustrious proof" Moses' final address to Israel, "which he

composed by the especial command of God to be learned by the Israelites, and committed to memory: 'That this song may be,' says God himself, 'for a witness against the people of Israel, when they shall depart from me; this shall be a testimony in their mouths; for it shall not be forgotten, nor shall it depart out of the mouths of their posterity for ever'" (Deut. xxxi. 19, 21; quoted in Lowth, II.19). This rhetorical imperative, as Lowth makes clear, is due to the particular historical condition of non or semi-literacy prevalent in the ancient mid-east during the formation of ancient Hebrew poetry, a condition which put a high value on memorable communication: "the only mode of instruction, indeed, adapted to human nature in an uncivilized state, when the knowledge of letters was very little, if at all diffused, must be that which is calculated to captivate the ear and the passions, which assists the memory, which is not to be delivered into the hand, but infused into the mind and heart" (I. 88).

With this historical condition in mind, Lowth performs a stylistic analysis of Old Testament verse, looking for those features "capable of interesting and affecting the senses and passions, of captivating the ear, of directing the perception of the minutest circumstances and of assisting the memory in the retention of them" (I, 80). What is for Cicero a way of describing "certain forms of expression" becomes the basis for Lowth's all-encompassing principle of parallelism: "The Hebrew poets frequently express a sentiment with the utmost brevity and simplicity, illustrated by no circumstance, adorned with no epithets (which in truth they seldom use); they afterward call in the aid of ornament; they reappear, they vary, they amplify the same sentiment; and adding one or more sentences which run parallel to each other, they express the same or a similar, and often a contrary sentiment in nearly the same form of words" (I, 100). In attributing the "proximate cause" of the parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry to the ancient connection between poetry and music, in particular "the custom of singing in alternate chorus," Lowth shows how the verse form grew out of a particular oral tradition. Here, he quotes from *Exodus*, in which "we learn that Moses with the Israelites chanted the ode at the Red-sea; for 'Miriam the prophetess took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her with timbrels, and with dances; and Miriam answered

them,' that is, she and the women sung the response to the chorus of men" (Exodus xv, 20, 21; qtd. in Lowth II, 26). In this tradition, we see the profoundly communal function of oral poetry: not only the prophetess but her "audience" participate in the creation of the poetic act, the reciprocal nature of which is figured in the parallel structure of Hebraic verse.

As one might suspect, one of the most important sources of Blair's orality is the rhetorical tradition itself. However, Blair's interpretation of the classical tradition seems as much to be guided by as to guide his search for primal rhetorical power, a logical extension of the eighteenth-century injunction to "follow nature." "Eloquence is no invention of the schools," he writes, "Nature teaches every man to be eloquent, when he is much in earnest. Place him in some critical situation; let him have some great interest at stake, and you will see him lay hold of the most effectual means of persuasion. The Art of Oratory proposes nothing more than to follow out that track which Nature has first pointed out to men" (II 4-5). For Blair, much of the rhetorical tradition is flawed for failing to do just this; his recounting of the history of rhetoric thus involves an extolling of the practitioners of rhetoric and a criticism of those aspects of the traditions--the catalogues of topics, tropes, and other mechanical devices--which seem to be a product of the literate, manual tradition. Blair finds the real source of rhetorical achievement not in manuals but in the kind of critical political situation which pertained in ancient Athens. "For there," he writes, "public speaking was not a mere competition for empty applause, but a serious contention for that public leading, which was the great object both of the men of ambition , and the men of virtue" (12). Like the Bard who, prompted by events, rises and sings, Blair's ideal orator is fully responsive to the contingencies of the moment. Under such conditions, passions are fully engaged, and, because the passions, for Blair, are part of human nature, they produce natural eloquence. "Almost every man, in passion, is eloquent. Then, he is at no loss for words and arguments. He transmits to others, by a sort of contagious sympathy, the warm sentiments which he feel; his looks and gestures are all persuasive; and Nature here shows herself infinitely more powerful than all art" (7). That such observations can be found almost verbatim in Quintilian suggests that

Blair's oralism taps into an aspect of the classical tradition--its Gorgianic fascination with the quasi-magical power of the spoken word--which has often been eclipsed by the technical tradition.

As suggested, Blair's interpretation of the classical tradition is guided by his own historical context, in particular what I would characterize as a general oral bias, typical of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory. In John Lawson's 1757 Lectures on Oratory, for example, we are presented a rhetorical vision quest which, while involving contact with the theorists of eloquence--in particular Quintilian and Aristotle--culminates in an encounter with the real thing: Eloquence herself. Near the goddess stands an aspect of rhetoric which, though not identified with Eloquence, is a featured speaker: "Near her, stood Persuasion in the Attitude of one speaking, with her Arm stretched out, Fire in her Eye, and irresistible Magick in her Tongue. Below were placed the Passions, each with her proper Symbols, Handmaids of the Goddess, always attending to obey her Orders. In the Countenance of the Goddess there was somewhat inexpressibly charming; the Tone of her Voice bewitched the Heart" (66). It is clear from this scenario that Lawson's idealized classical eloquence is profoundly oral in nature; although the students must undergo rigorous theoretical instruction, the ideal of rhetoric which guides Lawson's thinking, and which he hopes to infuse into the students of his lectures by cajoling them into become familiar with "Homer, Plato, and Demosthenes," is ultimately inspired not by rhetorics but by rhetoric: by the speaker speaking.

For eighteenth-century rhetorical theory, the person who best exemplifies rhetorical power is Demosthenes, a practicing orator who, according to Lawson, "is said to have learned Pronunciation from an Actor." And it is to an actor that we must turn if we are to find the most dramatic example of the general eighteenth-century idealization of orality which influenced Blair's work. Indeed, in the work of Thomas Sheridan there emerges a full-blown theory of rhetorical decline and remedy based on a recognition of the differences between what he calls oral and written language. Just as, for Lawson, rhetorical help lies in exposure to the best orators, for Sheridan, salvation takes the form of reeducating the culture in the natural eloquence of speaking, which the uncritical practice of reading and writing has seriously endangered.

Much of Sheridan's theory is presented as a more or less direct attack on the theories of John Locke, whom Sheridan criticizes for conceiving of language only in terms of signs on a page. According to Sheridan's theory of communication, Locke has not only mistaken the conventional for the essential, but he has virtually ignored elements of the mind which must be conveyed if complete communication is to take place. Because thought is so interwoven with emotion, unless "there be some means found, of manifesting those emotions, all that passes in the mind of one man can not be communicated to another" (99). Naming emotions is not enough; rather, they must be conveyed through the "true signs of the passions:" "tones, looks, and gestures" (100). Indeed it is because this aspect of communication has been neglected that modern theories, however precise and learned, have proven so ineffectual: "To the want of an intuition of this sort is it owing" comments Sheridan, "that Locke's noble *Essay on the Human Understanding*, has hitherto proved of so little benefit to the world" (ix).

Though independent, it is clear that, for Sheridan, these two media were not created equally. Having referred to the spoken language as "the gift of god" and written language as "the invention of man" Sheridan goes on to instance the rhetorical power of "a late minister, who by the mere force of cultivating the langauge bestowed by the Deity on human kind, as far as he could carry it by his own pains, raised himself to the sole direction of affairs in his country. . . . And if the language of nature be possessed of such power, in its present neglected and uncultivated state, how immense must be its force, were it carried to the same degree of perfection, that it was amongst the ancient Greeks and Romans?" (xii).

Ultimately, the notion that the language which includes "tones, looks, and gestures" is more "natural," is proven for Sheridan by the fact that they are shared, in general outline, by all humanity. "It was necessary to society, and to the state of human nature in general," he reasons, "that the language of animal passions of man at least, should be fixed, self-evident, and universally intelligible; and it has accordingly been impressed, by the unerring hand of nature, on the human frame" (101). Because words are understood only by those within a specific language group,

while tones expressive of the most general emotions are universally intelligible, the language of the passions have a kind of connection with the natural world which words, by themselves, lack.

By pointing out the theoretical delusions supported by the written medium and the rhetorical impotence promoted by poor reading instruction, Sheridan would have his audience consider a disturbing conclusion: rhetorically effective expression, it seems, declines with the rise in literacy, or, at the very least, with the rise of book culture which such literacy fosters. This conclusion finds support for Sheridan not only in the fact that the most bookish are the worst speakers but by his observation that those not incumbered by literacy tend to have access to a much broader range of expression. "Hence it comes to pass," he writes, "that the man wholly illiterate, who has no other ideas of language, but what he has obtained thro' his ear, always uses a variety of tones in speaking, such as are customary in his country; according to the sense of the words, or the emotions of his mind" (8). It is to such primary orality that we must look if we are to pursue "the noblest purposes of social communication," which "can not possibly be attained, by any language but that which proceeds from the living voice" (163).

That Blair's orality is part and parcel of a general oral bias typical, I would argue, of the "New Rhetoric" can be verified by an examination of George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, a work which, if not as directly celebratory of the spoken word as Sheridan, reveals the depth of its oral bias through the terms Campbell uses to formulate his theory of persuasion. Such an examination reveals that the medium of communication which ultimately guides Campbell in his rhetorical thinking is the spoken, and not the written word. "There is no art whatever that hath so close a connexion with all the faculties and powers of the mind, as eloquence, or the art of speaking, in the extensive sense in which I employ them" (lxxiii), he comments. The object of persuasion is "to operate on the soul of the hearer;" to do so, one must "excite some desire or passion in the hearers;" by exploiting "the imagination of the hearers." The composers of discourse are rarely, in the philosophical early chapters, referred to as "writers" but as "speakers" or "orators;" in fact, one of these chapters is entitled "the Consideration which the Speaker ought to

have of the Hearers, as men in general" (95). Although Campbell is not nearly as explicit as Sheridan or Blair in linking the spoken word to superior forms of persuasion, the scenes of overwhelming persuasion are all emphatically oral: The height of persuasion, what Campbell calls "vehemence" "bears down every obstacle, and procures the speaker an irresistible power over the purposes of his audience" (5).

Matters of correctness, then, though important for Campbell, most often take a back seat if the rhetorical aims most often associated with speaking are guiding the discourse. "The sole aim of grammar," Campbell writes, "is to convey the knowledge of the language . . . But the aim of eloquence is quite another thing. The speaker or the writer doth not purpose to display his knowledge in the langauge, but only to employ the language which he speaks or writes in order to the attainment of some further end" (180). And, as might be expected, when Campbell shifts his thinking from grammar to eloquence, the metaphors of communication shift accordingly: "It is not ultimately the justness either of the thought or of the expression, which is the aim of the orator; but it is a certain effect to be produced in the hearers" (215). For this reason, writes Campbell, "It does not belong to critics to give laws to prophets" (282).

That Campbell's rhetoric--like Lawson's, Sheridan's, and Blair's--is predominantly oral in its conception and priorities, however, is ultimately demonstrated by the fact that, after his excursus into the realm of correctness, and its accompanying paradigm of writing, Campbell, in his third and final book, returns to the empire of rhetoric, where vivacity--the rhetorical quality which makes deep and lasting impressions--holds sway. Not only do Campbell's models of communication revert to their normal oral selves, but the examples he chooses to demonstrate the principles of vivacity move from the writings of current, reputable authors, to the songs of Moses, the teachings of Jesus, the epics of Ossian, and other fundamentally oral discourses where may be found "the same vivacious manner" (292). The connection between vivacity and orality is especially apparent in an example Campbell draws from the New Testament: "'I have coveted,' says Paul to the elders of Ephesus, 'no man's silver, or gold, or apparel; yea, ye yourselves know

that these hands have ministered to my necessities, and to them that were with me.' Had he said," comments Campbell, "'my hands,' the sentence would have lost nothing either in meaning or in perspicuity, but very much in vivacity. The difference to hearers is obvious, as the former expression must have been accompanied with the emphatic action of holding up his hands to their view. To readers it is equally real, who in such a case instantaneously enter into the sentiments of hearers" (292).

Like the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* in general, Blair's orality has many sources. By basing their interpretation of ancient poetry on the historical circumstance that, before the advent of writing, language had to learn the language of the senses and emotion in order to be remembered, Blackwell and his many followers created a climate within which the rhetorical tradition was reinterpreted to emphasize the rhetorical power implicit in oral forms and traditions. Although the advent of writing might make such powerful forms of communication seem obsolete, writers like Lawson and Sheridan believed that they still had great utility, in empowering persuasion, and in countering the evisceration of rhetoric wrought by the writing. The resurgence of interest in the rhetorical power of the spoken word, and the persuasive ideals accompanying it, inevitably conflict with, as they do in Campbell, with the other abiding concern of eighteenth-century rhetoric: correctness and perspicuity. When Campbell states that it does not belong to the grammarian to "give laws to prophets" we can here the stirrings of early Romanticism. Beneath the cool, Addisonian prose of Blair, their lurks an Ossianic bard would reintroduce into the culture the primal rhetorical power which, always implicit in the classical tradition, becomes explicit through the rhetorical anthropology of the eighteenth-century, epitomized in the work of Hugh Blair.

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